

Use of written accent marks in Spanish

Accent marks are in Spanish for two different purposes: to indicate where the stress or emphasis falls on a word when it is pronounced, and to help differentiate between identically spelled words. They are only used over vowels (**á, é, í, ó, ú**), and are written as a short diagonal line, from upper right to lower left.

A. The following rules regarding written accents assume you know on which syllable of a word the stress occurs. An accent mark is normally NOT required if:

1. The word ends in a vowel (**a, e, i, o, u**) or **n** or **s** and the stress falls on the next-to-the-last (or penultimate) syllable. Examples:

camino	[ca-MI-no , <i>road</i> , ends in a vowel, and the stress falls on the next-to-the last syllable]
hablan	[HA-blan , <i>they speak</i> , ends in an n and the stress falls on the next-to-the-last syllable]
muchachas	[mu-CHA-chas , <i>girls</i> , ends in an s and the stress falls on the next-to-the-last syllable]

2. The word ends in a consonant other than **n** or **s** and the stress falls on the last syllable. Examples:

querer	[que-RER , <i>to want</i> , ends in an r and the stress falls on the last syllable]
ciudad	[ciu-DAD , <i>city</i> , ends in a d and the stress falls on the last syllable]

B. A written accent mark IS required if the situation is not as given in the above two rules, that is, when:

1. The word ends in a vowel (**a, e, i, o, u**) or **n** or **s** and the stress falls on the last syllable. Examples:

caminó	[ca-mi-NÓ , <i>he/she walked</i> ends in a vowel, and the stress falls on the last syllable]
canción	[can-CIÓN , <i>song</i> , ends in an n and the stress falls on the last syllable]
verás	[ve-RÁS , <i>you will see</i> , ends in an s and the stress falls on the last syllable]

2. The word ends in a consonant other than **n** or **s** and the stress falls on the next-to-last syllable. Examples:

mártir [MÁR-tir, *martyr*, ends in an **r** and the stress falls on the next-to-the-last syllable]
cárcel [CÁR-cel, *jail*, ends in an **l** and the stress falls on the next-to-the-last syllable]

3. The stress falls on any vowel more than two syllables from the end of the word. Examples:

propósito [pro-PÓ-si-to, *purpose*, is stressed on the third-from-the-last syllable]
dándomelo [DÁN-do-me-lo, *giving it to me*, is stressed on the fourth-from-the last syllable]

4. The stress falls on a weak vowel (**i** or **u**) which comes immediately before or after a strong vowel (**a**, **e**, **o**). Examples:

día [DÍ-a, *day*; the stress falls on an **i** which is immediately followed by an **a**]
actúo [ac-TÚ-o, *I act*; the stress falls on a **u** which is immediately followed by an **o**]

Note: Unless accented, the letters **i** and **u** become semi-consonants when they come in contact with other vowels. Thus, without written accents, the above words would be pronounced **DYA** (one syllable) and **AC-tuo** (two syllables).

To sum up the above rules:

Does the word end in **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**, **n**, or **s**?

- If the answer is “**yes**” and it is **not** stressed on the **next-to-the-last syllable**, a written accent is required.
- If the answer is “**no**” and it is **not** stressed on the **last syllable**, a written accent is required.

C. Accent marks are required on some words to differentiate them from otherwise identically spelled ones. There are three groups of these word pairs; in all cases the more emphatic word of the pair carries the written accent mark

1. Exclamation and question words are written with a written accent mark; the corresponding relative pronouns or connecting words are not:

¿adónde? (to) where?

adonde (to) where

¿cómo? how?

como as, like,

¿cuál?	<i>which?</i>	cual	<i>because</i>
¿cuándo?	<i>when?</i>	cuando	<i>which, as</i>
¿cuánto(s)?	<i>how much, how many?</i>	cuanto(s)	<i>when</i>
¿dónde?	<i>where?</i>	donde	<i>as much, as many</i>
¿qué?	<i>what, how?</i>	que	<i>where</i>
¿quién(es)?	<i>who, whom?</i>	quien	<i>which, that</i>
			<i>who, whom</i>

Examples:

¿Adónde vas?	<i>Where are you going?</i>
¿Cuánto cuesta?	<i>How much does it cost?</i>
¡Qué interesante!	<i>How interesting!</i>
No sé cómo se llama.	<i>I don't know what his/her name is.</i>
	<i>(indirect question)</i>
Cuando vengán, iremos al parque.	<i>When they come, we'll go to the park.</i>
Digo que no es verdad.	<i>I say that it isn't true.</i>
La mujer de quien hablas es la jefa.	<i>The woman you're talking about is the boss.</i>

2. Several pairs of monosyllabic (one-syllable) words are similarly distinguished by the presence or absence of accent marks. The word that is more emphatic receives the written accent.

dé	<i>give (subjunctive of dar)</i>	de	<i>of, from</i>
él	<i>he, him</i>	el	<i>the</i>
más	<i>more, most</i>	mas	<i>but</i>
mí	<i>me</i>	mi	<i>my</i>
sé	<i>I know (saber), be (ser)</i>	se	<i>himself, herself, etc.</i>
sí	<i>yes, indeed</i>	si	<i>if, whether</i>
té	<i>tea</i>	te	<i>you, yourself</i>
tú	<i>you</i>	tu	<i>your</i>

3. The demonstrative pronouns (**éste**, **ése**, and **aqué**l, *this one, that one*) generally carry a written accent mark, while the demonstrative adjectives (**este**, **ese**, and **aquel**, *this, that*) never do. Note also that the neuter pronouns **esto**, **eso**, and **aquello** (*this thing, this matter, this business*) never take an accent mark since there is no corresponding adjective form.

éste	ésta	éstos	ésta s	<i>this one, these</i>
ése	ésa	esos	ésa s	<i>that one, those</i>

aquél	aquélla	aquéllos	aquéllas	<i>that one, those</i>
este	esta	estos	estas	<i>this, these</i>
ese	esa	esos	esas	<i>that, those</i>
aquel	aquella	aquellos	aquellas	<i>that, those</i>

Examples:

No me gusta esta blusa; prefiero ésta.	<i>I don't like this blouse; I prefer that one.</i>
Eso es extraño.	<i>That's strange.</i>

D. Special cases.

1. When an adverb is formed by adding **-mente** to the feminine form of an adjective, the accent mark is retained, if the adjective form has one.
Examples:

fácil	<i>easy</i>	fácilmente	<i>easily</i>
rápido	<i>quick</i>	rápidamente	<i>quickly</i>

2. **Sólo** vs. **solo**:

Sólo (with an accent)	= solamente , <i>only</i> (an adverb)
solo (without an accent mark)	= <i>alone</i> (an adjective).

3. **Por qué** vs. **porque**:

Por qué (two words, with an accent mark)	= <i>why</i> (question word)
porque (one word, no accent mark)	= <i>because</i> .